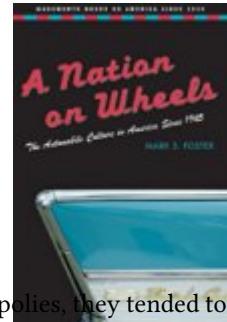


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark S. Foster. *A Nation on Wheels: The Automobile Culture in America Since 1945*. Belmont: Thomson, 2003. viii + 216 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-15-507542-9.

Reviewed by Robert M. Lindsey (Library, Pittsburg State University)  
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Mark S. Foster (Department of History, University of Colorado, Denver) has written an engaging introduction to automotive culture. *A Nation on Wheels* covers all aspects of automobile culture: manufacture, roads, assembly line workers, urban geography, youth, music, public policy, racism, fast food, family vacations and more. This extensive array of topics is covered within only 216 pages, and overall, is covered remarkably well.

The author remains even-handed in his handling of topics that can be highly contentious, and are usually dealt with polemically. Throughout the book Foster provides a counterpoint to the many anti-automobile publications that bewail the sad state we are in, and offer over-simplified reasons for the modern world's problems. Foster takes on the popular idea that big business, in hand with the political machine, forced people to accept the automobile irregardless of consequences. The author shows that people accepted the automobile and all that comes with it, not by conspiracy or coercion, but because they wanted what it offered. From the beginning, people accepted the car almost without reservation, or reflection of the consequences. The mostly unspoken assumption was that there was an abundance of land, fuel, raw materials, and money—everything needed to keep the crazy pace of growth. For many, if not most people, a car offered independence from mass transit, escape from either isolation (in the country) or crowded living conditions (in the city), and liberation from horses.

Why did people want independence from mass-transit, that wonderful, efficient idea? It may have been a wonderful idea, but Foster argues that the reality was less than ideal. This is the first book that this reviewer has read that addresses how uncomfortable and crowded mass-transportation was. And, because most

mass-transit companies were monopolies, they tended to be unconcerned about these issues. This is not to say that mass-transit could not work, only that it did not. In the boom that followed the Depression and World War II, most mass-transit companies went bust.

To escape both isolation and crowds, people flocked to the suburbs. While the intelligentsia scorned suburbs from their exclusive penthouses, sons and daughters of immigrants were ecstatic to own their own homes with yards (and, of course, garages). Home ownership was a dream many had never thought possible when they were young.

Cars also made getting around easier for many, as readying a horse and wagon could take up to an hour. In addition to taking so much time, being cantankerous, and occasionally dying, horses left (literally) tons of manure on city streets, creating disease and bacteria breeding grounds. Clean-up was neither easy nor quick, and the automobile was thought to be a cleaner alternative.

When the 1970s arrived, many different forces converged to attack American car culture, and rightly so. It had been unchecked for fifty years, and had become wasteful and sloppy. Foster shows what has been done to address these issues (improving gas mileage and safety measures after the federal government became involved), as well as what issues still need to be addressed, including urban sprawl, SUVs, and the desire for “unlimited personal mobility” (p. 59).

I have experienced firsthand the climate problems that car culture has created, even in small towns (under 30,000 people). A few years ago, I lived within easy walking distance of the only major department store, a grocery store and a few restaurants. The stores were located

on a tree-covered lane, and across a road from my home. Unfortunately, that “road” was a four-lane highway, hard enough to cross in a car during some parts of the day and impossible to walk across pulling a wagon, with kids in tow. Hence, we always drove to the store no matter how nice a day it was.

This reviewer’s main grievance with *A Nation on Wheels* is the complete lack of footnotes, or even a bibliography, which seriously hinders the book’s usefulness as an academic resource. The publisher’s web site claims this is a book aimed at the freshman-sophomore level, but if a student should wish to pursue this very interesting topic, a simple “for further reading” would be nice.

Another problem with the lack of footnotes is unsupported statements such as the one made about young male car enthusiasts. “They would neglect their own health, girlfriends, and even wives and children” (p. 120). I certainly knew men who would invest more time and money in their cars than in their girlfriends, but neglect their health? Does the author mean by engaging in reckless driving; or, perhaps, skipping meals?

There are a few factual errors, which seem to be in-

evitable in any broad survey. Foster calls a “Woody” a “station wagon with fake wood paneling,” but a Woody is a station wagon made with real wood (p. 85). There also seems to be some confusion about the Ford Model A. Foster states that John Dillinger chose a Model A V8, when such a car was actually never produced (p. 29). V8 engines did not appear until 1932, but the Model A ended production in 1931.

Except for the lack of bibliography, these are minor quibbles for a book that does an admirable job of covering a lot of ground in a very short amount of space. This book is an easy read and well written, in an interesting style. I would heartily recommend it for an undergraduate course looking for an appealing overview of these issues.

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